Connecticut Historical Society BULLETIN

Volume 16 Hartford, January, 1951 Number 1

CONNECTICUT GRAVESTONES

I

By Ernest Caulfield, M.D.

Fig. 1

In the Center Church graveyard there are about thirty seventeenth-century tombstones which were obviously cut by the same artist since they so closely resemble one another. The Windsor graveyard has twenty similar stones; and the graveyards of Simsbury, Suffield, Westfield, and Northampton each contain two or three. There is, however, none in Wethersfield or Middletown. This geographical distribution strongly suggests that the man

who made these stones lived in Hartford or Windsor. He did most of his work between 1657 and 1700, although a few stones dated before and after this period, such as those for the Reverend Ephraim Huet (Windsor, 1644) and Timothy Stanley (Hartford, 1648) appear to have been cut by him.

The smooth even texture of these thick reddish-brown stones indicates that they were quarried in Windsor. They can be easily distinguished from the coarse granular sandstones that came from Middletown not only by their texture and color but also by their edges, most of the Middletown stones having chamferred edges. For the most part, these Windsor stones have right-angled shoulders, rounded tops, and carefully cut yet simple undecorated borders which closely follow the outlines of the stones. Exercising every colonial stone-cutter's privilege this one occasionally departed experimentally from his favorite design to make a stone that was more nearly square, and there is one in Windsor shaped like the top half of an octagon. On two out of every three stones the inscribed surface is flush with the border and separated from it by a deep continuous line which usually ends considerably above the level of the ground. A few stones, such as those for Stephen Hosmer (Hartford, 1678) and B. W. (Windsor, 1680) have no borders. On the remainder the inscribed surfaces have been carefully chiseled and planed leaving the one or two-inch borders in bold relief. These overhanging borders, incidentally, have somewhat protected the inscriptions from weathering.

On the whole the lettering is deep and still easily legible, but even when shallow, it is still deep enough to be legible on close inspection, which is more than can be said of many gravestones that have been exposed to far fewer than two hundred and fifty Connecticut winters. Although one can find a few forgivable misspelled words, such as "neer" for "near" and "yeres" for "years", this artist made no gross blunders. He was, however, frequently cramped for space and was obliged to carve the final letter of a word or a hyphen in the border of the stone. His unusual division of words was in keeping with the colonial custom of utilizing every inch of space. This same habit manifests itself in old manuscripts containing words which are divided in ways that would now be considered incorrect.

Fig. 2

The one characteristic which distinguishes this craftsman from his contemporaries is his indiscriminate use of small and capital letters, as well as other minor peculiarities in lettering, such as dotting his capital I's even at the beginning of words like IOHN or IN. He made tall L's, extending their vertical bars far above the line, while his P's were cut to extend far below the line. His capital Y's resemble modern small y's in that the descender always extends below the line. Only occasionally did he use superior letters or the thorn. These peculiarities should not be interpreted as signs of illiteracy, because, as mentioned before, there are

very few mistakes in spelling and, what is more, no illiterate yokel would have been so fond of poetry. His verses, unlike those so frequently found on eighteenth-century tombstones, were not meant to scare the wits out of the passers-by; they were sympathetically carved as comforting words for friends of the deceased, such as the verse on the stone for Joseph Drake (see Fig. 1) who died in Windsor in 1657:

My body sleeps
My soul is blest
In armes of Christ
Where I do rest.

On the stone for B. W. (Windsor, 1680), a bit of the artist's philosophy is revealed:

What once was writ by one upon this stone
He hears is now washt out and lost and gone
Twas writ hoping in-time he might it find
Not on this stone but on the reders minde.

These gravestones are all very simple in composition. Never did the artist use those cynically smiling skulls with gnashing teeth that so frequently adorn contemporaneous Massachusetts stones. Massachusetts and Connecticut gravestones before 1730 are not in the same class and can hardly be compared, for the Massachusetts artists were exceedingly skillful with their chisels and they carved on slate which was a far better medium for minute detail. But it should be remembered that Massachusetts gravestones reached the peak of perfection in the seventeenth century, indicating that the artists were very likely under foreign influence, whereas Connecticut gravestones evolved from very plain designs and perhaps are more representative of native American art. Connecticut stone craftsmen, off in isolated wildernesses, appear to have been self-trained men completely oblivious that Boston was the hub of the gravestone universe.

Who was this pioneer craftsman who won the respect of so many of his contemporaries, whose reputation had spread at least as far as Northampton, and who was, perhaps, the most original of the earliest American sculptors? There is no direct evidence of his identity. Not one of his stones is signed by as much as one initial; and probate records of those whose graves were marked have been vainly searched for his name. There is, however, convincing circumstantial evidence that he was George Griswold who was born in Kenilworth, England, in 1633, who married Mary Holcomb (1632-1708), and who died in Windsor on September 3, 1704.

Among the Winthrop papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society are six letters written by Captain John Allyn of Hartford "To the Honourable Major John Winthrop at his house in New London." The first letter, dated March 17, 1682, implies that Allyn, having been commissioned to procure a gravestone for Elizabeth Winthrop who had died in 1673, was waiting patiently for John Winthrop to supply the inscription. The second letter is much the same:

Hartford May 21, 1681/2

Hon Sir I heartily salute you, in reference to your commands about the Tombe stone &c I have carefully attended it, and had I known your pleasure what to write upon it, it would have been finished by this time, & therefore pray by the next let me know your pleasure. I agreed with George Griswold to doe it not for any sum but he promised to use a good conscience in it & so I doubt not but he will,

her name & age & time of her death will be necessary as also whose consort she was, . . .

Honored sir your friend and servant,
John Allyn

On November 14, 1682, Winthrop's inscription not having arrived, Allyn submitted his own in which he tried his hand at poetry:

Here lyes the body of Mrs Eliz: Winthrop wife to the [*late*—scratched out] Honourable John Winthrop Esquire Governor for many years of this jurisdiction who deceased the first day of december: 1673: [*etatis*—scratched out] in the fifty six year of her age.

Honour & virtue grace & courtesy
And many great endowments here do lye
which scarcely in a matron [*may be*—scratched out] have been seen
in our New England [*since bohemias queen*—scratched out] had she never been.

Winthrop obviously did not appreciate Allyn's pitiful poetry because the proposed inscription was not returned. Letters of April 23, 1683, and January 7, 1684, reveal Allyn still waiting for instructions:

Sir, your mother's Tombe stone is not set up yet, for want of your approbation of what shall be writ upon it, the man is very earnest to doe it pleas therefore to send it by this bearer together with her age and day of death. Griswold will doe it now by reason of our great losses heare & he would gladly pay some of his country rate that way. . .

By July 6, 1684, more than two years after the first request, the inscription had not arrived.

The George Griswold mentioned in these letters was unquestionably the one who died in Windsor in 1704, because the inventory of his estate shows that he owned augers, gouges, narrow axes, wedges, "Tools for ingraving", as well as an interest in "the quarriefield." He also owned shoemaker's tools, and a fifth interest in the grist mill. It is said that his relations with the Indians were exceptionally friendly, nevertheless the inventory also shows that he kept a cutlass and belt, an old sword, "A Gunn & pistall and Amunition" just in case.

Since this George Griswold is known from the Winthrop letters to have been cutting gravestones in 1682, it is reasonable to conclude that he cut the stones for his own two children (Fig. 3) who died in May and June of that same year very probably from an epidemic disease. In October, 1682, there was a Day of Thanksgiving in Connecticut for the abatement of "the late sore sickness and deaths that have been in sundry of our plantations," but the nature of the disease that carried off the Griswold children still remains unknown. Their gravestones, however, can still be seen in Windsor, and from them can be learned most of the characteristics of George Griswold's art.

There were other gravestone sculptors working in the Connecticut River valley during Griswold's time. The first James Stanclift of Middletown was independently developing his own style on stones which he obtained from his quarry "on the Est syde of the Great River." In her delightful, instructive, and scholarly book on early New England gravestones, Mrs. Harriette M. Forbes discloses that Matthew Griswold, Jr., of Lyme was paid (1679) for the stone that still marks Lady Fenwick's grave; Mrs. Forbes also mentions that, according to tradition, the first Matthew Griswold may have cut a

Fig. 3

similar stone for Henry Wolcott in Windsor (1655). Her illustration of the stone for John Howell (Southampton, L.I., 1696) shows a Connecticut sandstone bearing a coat-of-arms, which is interesting in view of the fact that George Griswold also carved a coat-of-arms on the stone for nine-day-old Mary Farnsworth (Windsor, 1678). The lettering of these two stones, however, shows that they were cut by different hands. In Northampton and in Simsbury there are a few stones, such as that for Mercy Buel (Simsbury, 1688), which superficially resemble George Griswold's stones, but they do not have that finished touch which he had acquired by 1688.

After Griswold's death, and particularly between 1720 and 1740, another stonecutter, apparently in Bolton, was attempting to imitate George Griswold's style, but this is another chapter in the history of Connecticut gravestones. In his recently published list of Connecticut stonecutters, Kendall P. Hayward mentions two Griswolds who cut stones early in the nineteenth century, so it appears that the stonecutting art was in the Griswold blood. But for originality none surpassed the first George Griswold, he with the "good conscience", and, as of now, the earliest stone sculptor in the American colonies to be definitely identified.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Eva L. Butler. Abstracts of Winthrop Manuscripts. Mss., Conn. State Library.
Winthrop Manuscripts. Massachusetts Historical Society. X, 38-41.
Harriette M. Forbes. *Gravestones of Early New England*. Boston, 1927.
Glenn E. Griswold. *The Griswold Family*. Rutland, 1935, 18.
Kendall P. Hayward. *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*. XV, 1.

ABRAHAM PIERSON'S JOURNAL

(Concluded from volume 15, page 24)

February AD. 1785. Mr Jehiel Evarts Esqr. Lane & myself Apprized & Distributed the Estate of John Punderson Seward Decd. Revd. Wm Seward of Stanwich being Administrator—

At a meeting of a number of Subscribers in March AD. 1785 for a parish Library holden at Revd. Mr Ely's I was Chosen Clerk & was also chosen with Sd. Mr Ely & Capt. Bristol Comtee to Recieve the money that Should be paid & lay it out to purchase Books May 16th. 1785 all 3 of us the Comee. went to N. Haven & purchased about 50 Books the money we had Recd being but little more than 50 Dollars May 27th the propriators met at Sd. Mr Ely's & Divided Sd. Books when Capt Kelcey, Capt. Bristol, & myself were chosen a Comtee for the year ensuing

Lord's Day June ye 19th. 1785. at 12 O'Clock my wife was Delivered of a Female Child which when Dressed weighed 10 pounds wanting 2 ounces August 23d. 1785. I was Chosen Church Committee with Dean. Willcox Mr Evarts & Esqr Lane to Deal privately with offending Brethren Octr 26th or 27th I was an Arbitrator with Esqr Pierson & Capt. Lord between George Nettelton & Adam Willcox about Some Hogs Replevied out of the Pound— Society Meeting Decr 12th 1785. I was again Chosen Society Comtee Society Treasurer & Choirister—Town meeting Decr 13th I was Chosen Selectman & 2d. Constable—

At a Meeting of Authority & Selectmen first monday of Janry 1786. to Chuse Tavern keeper & I was Chosen Clerk of Sd. meeting—

At a Special Town Meeting February ye 1st. AD. 1786—I was Chosen Town Clerk for the year ensuing and Sworn—

March 28th I was an Arbitrator with Esqr Pierson & Capt. Caleb Baldwin in a Controversy between Jedidiah Harris & Joseph Willcox

At a Library meeting May AD. 1786. I was again Chosen Committee

At a freemen's meeting in April. 1786. I was Chosen for a Proprietor Clerk & Sworn—

Septr 21. 1786 Recd. from the Treasr. a Discharge of the State Taxes I Collected—

At the Session of the Genl Assembly in May AD. 1786. I was appointed Justice of the Peace for year ensuing but Did not take the Oath till Decr. ye 1st AD. 1786—

First Monday in October AD. 1786—I was Chosen Captain of 7th Comp. 7th Regt. Militia by a majority of 95 to 16—

I forgot to Record that in June: 1786 I was by Hezh. Lane Esqr. Judge of Probate for Saybrook District appointed Probate Clerk—On & about the first of Decr. 1786—I Served in 12 Public Offices viz—Justice of Peace—Captain, Town Clerk—Selectman—Constable—Society Committee—Probate Clerk—Proprietors Clerk—Society Treasurer—Choirister—Church Committee & Library Committee—

At a Society Meeting Holden by Adjournment Decemr. 18th. AD. 1786. I was Chosen Society Comtee. but Refused—I was also chosen Choirister & Society Treasurer—At a Town Meeting Holden by Adjournment Decr. 19th 1786 I was Chosen Town Clerk & Selectman

Satturday Novr. ye. 17th half after 4 of the Clock in the Morning My wife was Delivered of a Son which weighed 6 lb & three Quarters—

INFORMATION WANTED

Members of the Society will be interested in a research project of A. C. Burnett, 3700 Montrose Boulevard, Houston 6, Texas. Mr. Burnett is endeavoring to secure biographical information on all persons who migrated early from Connecticut to Texas. Factual material such as date of birth, birthplace, marriage and biographical data prior to emigration is especially desired. If pictures are available, permission to reproduce them is wanted. The following is Mr. Burnett's working list as of this date. Additions will be most welcomed.

Austin, John (born in New Haven)
Austin, Moses (born in Durham)
Austin, William T
Bass, J M
Bennett, Zimbri
Bissell, Theodore
Brooks, Gilbert
Canfield, Alanson W
Cass, James S
Clark, William
Cone, Albert
French, John G
Gorham, William
Grovesnor, George Henry
Lusk, William
Mansfield, Isaac
Norton, Allen
Pease, E M
Pease, L T
Potter, Henry N
Robins, Samuel
Russel, Aurelia
Russell, Robert
Russell, Robert B
Taylor, John
Voil, Daniel H
Wells, Lysander (born in Middletown)
Whiting, Hervey
Whiting, Samuel
Woodworth, Jonathan

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

Alterations on the new building are progressing according to schedule. All plans have been completed and it is expected delivery of the new show cases will coincide with the refinishing of the second floor. It is still too early as this is written (the end of October) to set a date for reopening the museum. Chances are good there will be an "open house" celebration to which all members will be invited.

Early in November, removal of materials in the storage warehouse will commence. Four days are scheduled, November 2, 3, 6, and 7. This will give

an indication as to how fast and how much more can be brought in before erection of the stack wing. Our collection of portraits and framed objects will follow and be stored on racks especially erected for them in the attic.

The stack wing is still in the planning stage. Soil borings have been made and engineers are now evaluating their findings preparatory to planning the type of foundation required for the load to be placed in the stack. We have a clay situation which requires careful interpretation or trouble will result. Bids for the stack itself are being prepared and before the publication of these lines a decision will have been reached.

Miss Helen Waterman has joined our staff as volunteer curator of the Museum and is devoting full time to cataloguing museum objects as they go into storage here. In a basement storage room we have installed units containing 66 drawers, 12 cupboards with doors, 19 glass enclosed shelves and 6 open shelves. These were all removed from wardrobe closets on the second floor and from a pantry converted to a manuscript stack room.This makes splendid dust free storage for thousands of objects and Miss Waterman is processing them virtually as rapidly as we can pack and move them from the old building.

At the time of the Annual Meeting, the total membership of the Society was 632. Since then, we have admitted or have applications from 45 persons. During the same period, we have lost 12 by death and resignation so that our net gain is 33, or a total membership of 665.

Through the admission of 45 new members, our Publication Fund Principal has been augmented by $135, and our General Fund Income has an anticipated net annual increase from dues of $85. This is of course very important, for additional income becomes available for publishing purposes and also for general expenses.

This Society should have a membership considerably larger than it now enjoys. To achieve this, every member must actively support the Society. There are few organizations that offer so much for so little, and even fewer that do so much with so little. When our handsome new building is completed, it will be a show place for Connecticut in which we all will take great pride. You can help us reach this goal by securing new members.

Pressure of moving has delayed preparation of the index to the preceding volume. Consequently we have an opportunity to bring our members up to date on progress.

On December 22, the Special Building Committee approved plans for the storage wing and authorized immediate construction. The contract for the 3 level multi-tier steel stack was awarded the Art Metal Construction Company of Jamestown, N. Y. Their bid of $28,051 was the lowest received. The cost of the shell is estimated at $70,000. It will be faced with a light brick that harmonizes with the granite of the existing building. Without delays, construction is expected to be finished in 20 weeks. Many materials, considered critical, are already on our property. Excavating was commenced on December 26 and piles were driven, footings poured and the foundation virtually completed as we go to press.

The price of these Bulletins is ten cents each.